Arab Semi-desert Life as Mirroring Arab Thought Grand Theory, 2025, Updated Version

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Life in the Arab semi-desert during the pre- and post-Islamic eras was not slow-paced, as some writers argue, but it was also marked by its fast pace.

There were two factors that did influence the Arab semi-desert life; one during peacetime, and that was the slow mobility of the caravans which were made up of a train of camel-riders, and the other factor was the fast mobility of the horsemen or the cavaliers at wartime. The last factor was clearly represented by the several mini-wars that erupted among the Arab tribes before Islam; which were historically called the "Days of the Arabs." Those "Days of the Arabs," or the Arabs' mini-wars had adopted the old military tactic of "hit-and-run," as its key combat strategy at that time. It is natural for peace to be the normal state of affairs in any human society, though the intra-Arab mini-wars were the order of the day in the pre-Islamic era.

Consequently, from the above two paradoxical elements, the originality of the Arab thought came into being, while the balance that had been struck between those two elements played such a key role in determining the salient features of the Arab thought throughout its long history. Accordingly, the Arab thought was never such a static or a slow-moving or a sedentary one as it had already wielded a fast-moving element, namely the fast mobility of the horsemen during the pre-Islamic mini-wars that made best use of the "hit-and-run" military tactic.

Those two previous elements, combined with the resources wielded by the peasantry and the flexibility shown by the seafarers in the countries that were triumphantly entered by the Arabs, did eventually enable the victorious Arabs to establish such a mammoth empire following the advent of Islam, according to an opinion expressed by the famous geographer Dr. Gamal Hamdan in his book titled "Colonialist Strategy and Liberation."

Dr. Hamadan is quoted as saying: "to recapitulate, though the Arab force which was in the ascendant with the advent of Islam was originally a desert and shepherds' force marked by the mobility of cavaliers and camel-riders, it was soon transformed into both land and sea powers combining the resources of peasants and the flexibility of seafarers, becoming in a nutshell an amphibian

force at the heart of the Old World." (1) Hamdan's opinion was rightfully based, according to him, on a study conducted by the world-renowned geo-strategist Sir. Halford Mackinder in his trailblazing book titled "Democratic Ideals and Reality." (2)

Taking a similar tack, the notions of the camel-riders and the horsemen or the cavaliers were vividly depicted by the global cinema in that famous "Lion of the Desert," movie (3) directed by the Hollywood world-renowned director Moustapha Akkad. The movie, that relates the life story embodying the epic struggle of the Libyan fighter Omar Al-Mukhtar against the colonialist expansion spearheaded by the Mussolini-led Italian Fascist party, starts with a shot showing a caravan of camel-drivers going slowly through the desert in peacetime. Then the same movie ends with a shot showing a group of gun-carrying horsemen with their steeds galloping forward rapidly at wartime, using the same old military tactic of "hit-and-run."

Those two cinematic shots totally sum up the tempo of life in the Arab semi-desert in what actually mirrors the Arab thought as starting with the slow mobility of the camel-riders in peacetime and ending by the fast mobility of the horsemen or cavaliers at wartime. Moreover, those two cinematic shots do best embody the genius of this Arab world-renowned director.

When it comes to war, the boasting poetry is more relevant to it than anything else, and the best case in point is the famous pre-Islamic poem by Amr Ibn Kalthoum. The renowned pre-Islamic poet uses the Arabic poetic meter al-Wafir in this long poem, and this meter truly fits the boastful purposes sought by the poet.

The following lines quoted from his poem in Arabic do best illustrate the declamatory war tone which reflects that fast-moving, vivid, and much-vaunted imagery:

إذا بلغ الرضيع لنا فطاما تخر له الجبابر ساجدينا

ملئنا البر حتى ضاق عنا وماء البحر نملئه سفينا

ألا يجهلنا أحد علينا فنجهل فوق جهل الجاهلينا

And here is a translation of the above lines of poetry by Arthur Arberry (4)

When any boy of ours reaches his weaning,

the tyrants fall down before him prostrating.

We have filled the land till it's too strait for us,

and we are filling the sea's back with our vessels.

So let no man act foolishly against us,

or we shall exceed the folly of the foolhardiest.

It is more accurate to classify Arab thought theory as a grand theory rather than a middle-range one (5). Grand theories aim to explain broad social phenomena and are often abstract and complex, while middle-range theories focus on more specific, testable concepts within a particular domain.

The reasons for that classification include: first, the scope of the Arab thought theory because as a field of study it encompasses a wide range of intellectual and cultural developments across the Arab world, covering diverse topics like philosophy, literature, social structures, and political thought.

Regarding the Arab philosophy, there are two antithetical authors who could best embody the history of the Arab philosophy. The first one is the famous scholar Abu Hamed al-Ghazali who wrote a book in which he slammed philosophy as a pseudo discipline, and that book is entitled in Arabic "Tahafut al-Falasifa," or "The incoherence of Philosophers." Then, came the world-renowned Arab philosopher Averroes, who refuted Al-Ghazali's views and wrote a book representing an apology for philosophy which is titled in Arabic "Tahafut al-Tahafut," or "The Incoherence of the Incoherence."

As for Arabic literature, the most important genre in it is the Arabic poetry, which was called the "Divan of the Arabs," or the "Eternal Record of the Arabs' Life." There are two antithetical poets who could best represent the history of the Arabic poetry, namely Abu Tammam and al-Buhturi with the first one representing the poetry of artifice, namely poetry as an acquired craft versus the

other one representing poetry as a natural talent. In this respect, there is a key book on the comparison between those two Arab poets written by famous Arab

linguist Abu al-Qasim Al-Amidi (6). Meanwhile, the production of both poets is too relevant to the theory of the Arabic rhetoric set by the renowned rhetorician Abdul Qahir al-Jurjani, which is called the theory of Nazm or Syntactic Harmony that originally deals with the rhetorical devices of the Ever-Honorable Qur'an.

Concerning social structures, the Muqaddimmah of Ibn Khaldoun (7) could not be overlooked in this respect as the precursor of the modern sociology, and as an accurate analysis of the Arab society during that historical era.

As for the Arab political thought, I do think that it had seen its heyday, with the decline of the Arab civilization under the Ottomanic rule as this led to the appearance of some prominent thinkers who resisted tyrannical rule and supported Islamism and pan-Arabism respectively; foremost among those thinkers are Al Afghani and Al Kawakibi.

This broad scope of the Arab thought aligns with the characteristics of grand theories, which aim to explain large-scale social phenomena. Then, there is another reason which is its abstraction because the Arab thought theory involves abstract concepts and interpretations of history, culture, and intellectual traditions, which is characteristic of grand theories.

Then, there is a third reason which is its testability as grand theories, like the Arab thought theory, are often difficult to test directly due to their broad scope and abstract nature, but the middle-range theories are designed to be more specific and testable within particular research contexts.

Grand theories are exemplified in Marxism, Functionalism, and Feminist Theory. While some theories within the Arab thought might be more focused, the overall field is considered a grand theory due to its scope and complexity.

Conversely, middle-range theories focus on more specific phenomena, like a theory of reference groups, social mobility, or role conflict, according to Wikipedia (8).

Grand theories provide a broad framework for understanding society as a whole, like theories about why some countries are wealthy and others are

poor. Therefore, while some specific theories within the broader field of Arab thought might be considered middle-range, the overall field itself is best categorized as a grand theory due to its scope, level of abstraction, and difficulty to test directly.

References:

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